PUBLISHING Breaking the mold again, Whole Earth Review is asking subscribers for charity.

WHEN magazines hit the financial skids, they are generally either sold or killed; there is very little hope of finding an alternative. One tactic that would likely never occur to big magazine companies like Condé Nast or Hachette Filipacchi is to canvas subscribers for contributions.

But Whole Earth Review has never been like most magazine companies. Throughout the 25 years of its existence, the touchy-feely, techno-savvy publication has exploded one convention after another.

It has refused to accept any display advertising on the principle that it compromises editorial freedom and subscribers are a more important source of income. All staff members have been paid the same salary, no matter what their positions. And the magazine has featured controversial cover topics like "Doing Drag and Male Identity."

The magazine, based in Sausalito, Calif., grew out of the Whole Earth Catalog — once a hugely popular almanac of products for the 1960's back-to-the-land generation — and has long promoted a philosophy of individual responsibility and personal empowerment.

"We *are* as gods and might as well get good at it," wrote founder Stewart Brand in his original statement of purpose for the catalogue, adding that a " realm of intimate, personal power is developing the power of individuals to conduct their own education, find their own inspiration, shape their own environment and share the adventure with whoever is interested."

Since then, the staff of the magazine has refined that statement slightly: "We are dedicated to self-teaching, and to encouraging people to think for themselves.

"Our publications are a call to, and support for, individual action."

It was little wonder that when Whole Earth Review found its survival in jeopardy, the magazine made that call to action on its own behalf. In a letter to "subscribers and friends" dated Summer Solstice 1996, the Review's management laid out its financial troubles. The nonprofit quarterly publication had been running a deficit of $20,000 a month, the letter explained. It could not pay the printer or its 10 employees.

"We're not dead yet," the letter said. "We intend to come back — with your help."

To come back, the magazine needs to raise $600,000 in the next 18 months. The letter asked readers for minimum contributions of $35, as well as feedback. "What do you value about Whole Earth Review?" the letter asked. "What would you want to change?"

The Review — published by the Point Foundation, a not-for-profit educational organization — also said it would be taking a six-month break to sort out the magazine's financial troubles. There would be no summer and fall issues. During the hiatus, those staff members who were not laid off would consider several options, including merging with another magazine, beginning to carry advertising or throwing in the towel.

"It was a decision based on economics," said Michael Stone, the Review's general manager. "We were not taking in enough income to sustain the publication and really needed to step back, raise some money and look at the organization and its financial viability."

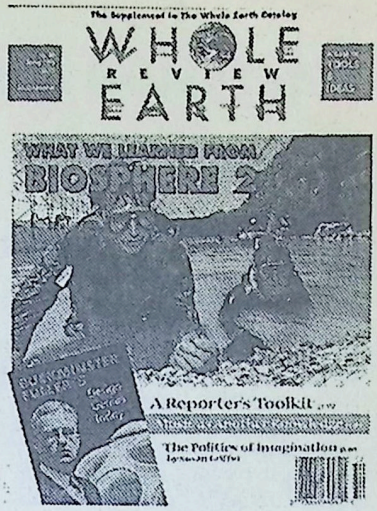
The magazine blames its struggles in part on paper and postage costs, as well as on the diminishing success of its catalogues, which over the years had offered practical information — but no longer products — for everything from how to build a windmill to beekeeping to goat farming to how to prepare a neighborhood disaster tool box in anticipation of an earthquake or hurricane.

The organization said it would only break even on its Millennium Whole Earth Catalog, published by HarperCollins in 1994. And while the Point's sale of its on-line service, the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), helped pay the bills for 1993 and 1994, those funds have now run out.

True to Whole Earth's power-of-the-individual philosophy, the magazine's readers have rallied. In the last two months, the magazine has raised $112,000 in donations, two-thirds of its stated goal for subscribers. It hopes with the help of foundation money to be back on its feet in time to publish a winter issue. "We are not folding," said David Katz, the Review's interim publisher. "We foresee a rebirth."

The Review has also received some 2,000 responses from subscribers offering their support and ideas. "This magazine is very important to people and their lives," Mr. Katz said.

The Review has long been a favorite of some 16,000 subscribers who have looked forward to its irreverent articles on topics natural and technological. Its most recent issue, published in March, included an excerpt from a book about how Buckminster Fuller's ideas are relevant today, a piece on lessons from Biosphere 2 and an article on the Conference for the Society of Ecological Restoration.



After asking its readers for donations two months ago, Whole Earth Review has raised $112,000.

The magazine has always been just plain off-beat. It categorizes its donors with quirky names: Perpetual Supporter ($10,000 — Marlon Brando has long been one of those); Angelic ($5,000); Maniacal ($1,000); Munificent ($250); Sustaining ($100); Retaining ($50).

"It feels like a relationship to me," said Cliff Martin, a longtime subscriber and sometime writer for the Review who lives in Oregon. "When there was an article on urban growth in the Midwest or how to keep a human head alive after someone is dead, I wasn't interested, but then there would be an article on how the World Wide Web is going to affect the next election.

"It's very sad that this wonderful icon might fall apart," Mr. Martin said. "I think it's going to leave a real gap in contemporary journalism."

As to whether or not readers could tolerate the introduction of advertising into the Review — heretofore supported by $20 subscriptions, donations and the catalogues — most have responded in the affirmative. "The vast majority of people who comment on advertising say, 'Hey, we can handle it,' " Mr. Katz said.

Still, there inevitably is something poignant about the magazine's current predicament; to stay alive, it will have to abandon much of its very essence. The magazine will probably end up accepting advertising. It may merge with another publishing company. And it is likely to become a for-profit operation.

"It's been a difficult time," Mr. Stone said. "This is not a move anybody wanted to have to make."